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SUBJECT: SPAIN: ZAPATERO'S CHIEF OF STAFF ON AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission J. Robert Manzanares,  
reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: DCM Manzanares met May 18 with Jose Enrique Serrano, President Zapatero's chief of staff. Serrano said the Zapatero government planned to maintain the same excellent relations other Spanish governments have had with the U.S. since the administration of Socialist president Felipe Gonzalez. Serrano said the GOS likely would make a decision on increased participation in Afghanistan and assistance to Haiti in the next week or so, but would not announce it until after the June 13 European parliamentary elections (several days later, Zapatero's foreign policy advisor, who works for Serrano, said even a decision on Afghanistan would not be made until after June 13, see septel). With respect to Afghanistan, he said that in light of the June 13 European parliamentary elections, the government had to be careful on timing to avoid making it appear to the public that Spain was simply trading troops in Iraq for an increased presence in Afghanistan. The Zapatero government was looking at an increase of about 200 or so troops in Afghanistan. Serrano was aware of our desire for more. On Haiti, GOS is considering the options of providing police or troops, but again would have to prime public opinion because the Spanish people have little grasp of the situation in Haiti. End summary.

2. (C) Serrano, an important contact of the Embassy's before assuming his current position, said the Zapatero government has every intention of maintaining excellent relations with the U.S. Like many of our new Zapatero government interlocutors, Serrano pointed to the very good relations the last Socialist president, Felipe Gonzalez, had with the U.S. and said Zapatero would aim for relations as good or better than those that Gonzalez maintained. Serrano in fact had held the same post during the Gonzalez administration. He recalled that despite difficult moments such as the Spanish referendum on NATO membership and negotiations to terminate the U.S. presence at Torrejon Air Base near Madrid, ties with the USG remained good during this period, and under Felipe Gonzalez, Spain had joined the coalition in the first Iraq war in 1991 to evict Iraq from Kuwait.

3. (C) Serrano said the GOS would not be able to announce an increase in its presence in Afghanistan before the June 13 European Parliament elections, although the president might actually make the decision earlier, perhaps in the next week. DCM emphasized the importance of announcing a decision before the NATO Summit in Istanbul. Serrano understood but said that given the importance to the Zapatero government of winning the June 13 elections handily, it would be difficult to announce a decision much before the Summit. He emphasized Spain's Iraq contingent will have completely returned to Spain by May 27, and the government simply could not risk making it look to the public like troops were returning from Iraq only to turn around and head for Afghanistan.

4. DCM said that the USG, after having expressed its disappointment with the Iraq troop withdrawal decision, wants to move forward with the GOS and wanted to find concrete, visible areas of cooperation. A robust increase in Afghanistan would be an important signal, the DCM stressed.

5. (C) Comment: Serrano echoed what we have heard from other GOS officials: the Zapatero government wants to maintain tight relations with the U.S. He understood the U.S. is expecting to see actions to back up the government's words and gave us positive signals on Afghanistan. We expect Spain to increase modestly its contingent in Afghanistan, although the GOS will not likely announce its increase until after the June 13 elections.

ARGYROS